

“The Blow from Hell.”

A striking letter from Mr. G. K. Chesterton,
published in the Press on August 7th, 1915.

THE admirable efforts of the National Committee for Relief in Belgium are going a long way to avert famine, but if the million-and-a-half destitute Belgians still in Belgium are to be kept alive the National Committee must have yet further support.

The only conceivable cause of doubt in the matter must lie in a mere weariness in well-doing, produced not by any intellectual difficulty but by such wholly unintellectual things as time and fatigue. I think, therefore, the best way of preventing any possible neglect of so great a matter is to repeat once more the great truths upon which rested the whole original claim, not so much on our sympathy as on our common honesty. The simplicity and enormity of the Belgian story can best be set forth, perhaps, in four truisms, all toweringly self evident.

THE CRIMES OF THE PRUSSIAN KINGS.

First, of course, the mere badness of the story is almost too big to be held in the mind. There have been stories of a woman or a child actually robbed of reason for life by the mere ocular shock of some revolting cruelty done in their presence. There was really a danger of something of the kind paralysing our protest against the largest and, by the help of

God, the last of the crimes of the Prussian Kings. The on-lookers might have been struck into a sort of gibbering imbecility and even amiability, by the full and indefensible finality of the foul stroke. We had no machines that could measure the stunning directness of the blow from hell. We could hardly realise an enormous public act which the actor did not wish to excuse, but only to execute. Yet such an act was the occupation of Belgium; almost the only act in history for which there was quite simply and literally nothing to be said. Bad history is the whole basis of Prussia: but even in bad history the Prussians could find no precedent and no palliation: and the more intelligent Prussians did not try. A few were so feeble-minded as to say they had found dangerous documents in Brussels, as if what they had done could possibly be excused by things they did not know when they did it. This almost piteous lapse in argument was, however, covered up by the cleverer Prussians as quickly as might be. They preferred to stand without a rag of reason on them than with such a rag as that. Before we come to the monstrous material suffering, there is in the existing situation an abstract unreason, nay an abstract insanity, which the brain of man must not bear. A nightmare must not abide to the end. The tiniest trace of Prussian victory that remains will make us think of something which is not to be thought of: of something like the victory of the beasts over mankind.

“THE THINGS OF SHAMELESS SHAME.”

Second, it must be remembered that this murder has been done upon a people of such proximity and familiarity that there cannot be any mistake about the matter. There is some shadowy justification for the comparative indifference to the wrongs of very remote peoples: for it is not easy for us to guess how much slavery shocks a negro or cannibalism a cannibal. But the innkeepers and shopkeepers of Ostend felt exactly as the innkeepers and shopkeepers of Dover would feel. We have to imagine a pre-historic cruelty coming suddenly upon a scene which was civilised and almost commonplace. Imagine tigers breaking out of the Zoological Gardens

and eating all the people in Albany Street; imagine Red Indians exhibited at Olympia literally scalping every passer-by from that place to Hammersmith Broadway: imagine Jack the Ripper crowned King of Whitechapel and conducting his executions in broad daylight outside the Tube station at Aldgate; imagine as much as you can of what is violent and contradictory in an over-turn of all modern life by troglodytes; and you are still falling short of this fearful Belgian scene in that familiar Belgian scenery. It is idle to talk of exaggerations or misrepresentations about a case so close to us. Chinese tortures may not be quite so fantastic as travellers tell us; Siberia may not be so desolate as its fugitives say it is: but we could no more invent such a massacre in Belgium than we could a massacre in Balham. The things of shameless shame that have been done are something worse than prodigies, worse than nightmares, worse than devilries; they are facts.

“BELGIUM STANDS ALONE.”

Third, this people we have heard of daily have endured this unheard of thing; and endured it for us. There are countless cases for compassion among the bewildering and heart-rending by-products of this war: but this is not a case for compassion. This is a case for that mere working minimum of a sense of honour that makes us repay a poor man who has advanced his last penny to post a letter we have forgotten to stamp. In this respect Belgium stands alone; and the claims even of other Allies may well stand aside till she is paid to the uttermost farthing. There has been self-sacrifice everywhere else; but it was self-sacrifice of individuals, each for his own country; the Serbian dying for Serbia, or the Italian for Italy. But the Belgian did not merely die for Belgium. Belgium died for Europe. Not only was the soldier sacrificed for the nation; the nation was sacrificed for mankind. It is a sacrifice which is, I think, quite unique even among Christians; and quite inconceivable among pagans. If we even privately utter a murmur, or even privately grudge a penny for binding the wounds of so solitary and exceptional a martyr, we ourselves shall be something almost as solitary and exceptional. We

shall perhaps be nearest to the state of that unspeakable sociologist who persuaded his wife to partake of a simultaneous suicide; and then himself cheerfully lived on.

WE MUST DO MORE.

Fourth: If there be anyone on this earth who does not find the final success of such crime more than the mind can bear; if there be anyone who does not feel it as the more graphic since it walks among the tramway lines and lamp-posts of a life like our own; if there be anyone who does not feel that to be caught napping about Belgium is like being caught robbing one's mother on her death-bed; there still remains a sort of brutal compassion for bodily pain, which has been half-admitted here and there even by the oppressors themselves. If we do not do a great deal more even than we have already done, it may yet be said of us that we left it to the very butchers of this nation to see that it did not bleed to death.

I therefore plead for further help for the Members of the National Committee who have taken this duty upon themselves. All subscriptions can be addressed to the Treasurer at Trafalgar Buildings, Trafalgar Square, London, or to Local Committees where they have been formed.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

OVERROADS,

BEACONSFIELD, BUCKS,

5th August, 1915.